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Everyday agency and centred marginality: being “youth” in the oil-rich Niger Delta of Nigeria

« Faire le jeune » dans les gangs de l’économie clandestine pétrolière (delta du Niger, Nigéria)

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1 Since 1956, oil production has been a major source of revenue for the Nigerian state and one of its key links to the global economy. This production has centred around the mangrove creeks and rivers of the Niger Delta region and huge offshore fields in the Gulf of Guinea, which have generated hundreds of billions of US dollars in revenue over the last 50 years (Watts, 2008). The recent history of oil production in the Niger Delta has been framed by multiple paradoxes. Chief among these is that, whereas the region has brought in so much in oil wealth for the Nigerian state, political elite and oil multinationals, poverty remains a reality of everyday life for many people living in the region (Omeje, 2004; Imobighe, 2011). The high levels of inequality are embedded within a social fabric that is complex not just because of the sheer number and dynamism of identities that compete for access to oil resources within the region (Ejobowah, 2000), but also because this competition is fought out in spite of a general sense of shared marginality. Many analysts have written extensively about the profound implications of ethnic/community-themed contestations in the region and how oil extraction has been the canvas upon which many grievance registers are played out (Welch, 1995; Nwajiaku, 2005; Umejesi and Akpan, 2013).

2 The role that oil extraction plays in shaping social relations and politics in the Niger Delta underlines not just the complexity of the resource (or indeed natural resources extraction more generally) as a driver of development but also the specific ways in which postcolonial institutions can shape or be shaped by the flow of a globally relevant resource. In many ways, Niger Delta youth have been the most vocal social category challenging these contradictions (Obi, 2006; Osaghae and al., 2011; Ugor, 2013; Iwilade, 2014). This is not surprising given the large-scale distortions that the oil

industry had inflicted on local livelihoods as well as its impact on an emergent youth culture of violent protest that has been legitimised by the violence-themed engagements seemingly favoured by the Nigerian state and multinational oil companies (Ifeka, 2006; Iwilade, 2014). The Niger Delta’s urban spaces are the sites in which many of these violent social mobilisations have taken place. This paper explores the meaning of youth in Colombia—a very vibrant youth-controlled urban space.

3 In order to explore youth meanings in the Delta context, this paper is divided into four substantive sections. The first provides a brief description of the neighbourhood of Colombia in the oil city of Port Harcourt. This is the research site from which themes in the construction of youth meanings in the context of a broader oil economy are extracted. Having provided this descriptive context of the research site, the section that follows explores what youth means. In particular, it disaggregates that generational category and, by drawing on insights from Colombia, argues that *being youth* is profoundly different from *being young*. The next two sections explore various aspects of this argument by discussing the notion of “angels”—that is, young people who are not engaged in violent politicised or economic action—and the implications of respectability in these sorts of contexts for how we think of the youth category.

A brief look at Port Harcourt’s *Colombia* neighbourhood

4 Colombia was a lower-middle-class neighbourhood located in the southern edge of the oil city of Port Harcourt in Nigeria’s Rivers State. Its chaotic nature reflected, in many ways, the urban decay that has been seen in many parts of Nigeria. Between 1996 and 2009, parts of the neighbourhood, especially what used to be its wide-open spaces, were both a hotbed of gang violence and an example of youth-driven social organisation. The Colombia label is partly, I am told, an attempt to draw parallels with the 1980s “Escobaresque” violent, drug-driven reputation of the Latin American country of Colombia itself.

5 The heart of Port Harcourt’s Colombia is at Niger and Bende streets and most of the social activities described here revolved around a large, open playground called the “Number One Field”. This open field was bound on one side by small, temporary wooden shacks from which young women sold locally-made gin, beer, and pepper soup. The Romeo Night Club in which transactional sex and drug-dealing activities were conducted was located close to the Number One Field. Young people often gathered around here, mostly in the evenings, to hang out in a space that offered relative protection from the state.

6 While the façade of Colombia appeared criminal and chaotic, it concealed a complex system of collective organisation, social order and mutual support that thrived on its distance from formal authority and the precarity it created. The Number One Field reflected the urban decay that was set off in the late 1980s when structural adjustment imposed cutbacks on social projects on the Nigerian government. The field had been earmarked as a site for sports infrastructure for local youth, but was abandoned as a result of the pressures of adjustment. The space has since been reclaimed by the government. The stories that relate directly to the open field that adjoins the Niger-

Bende streets are therefore the recollections of community members who were active in the area from about 1995 to 2009.

7 Routledge's (1997: 70) notion of the tendency of social groups to "endow space with amalgams of different meanings, uses and values" is relevant here as it illustrates the ability of local youth to create alternate cultures and realities as well as exert considerable agency that, in this case, allowed them to negotiate new meanings of self, of normality and of tradition. Apparently, the transnational implications and relevance of urban violence and instability that few societies encapsulated better in the 1990s than the narcotics- and corruption-fuelled violence in the real Colombia was not lost on the youth of Port Harcourt's Colombia. By appropriating the Colombia label, youth were, according to an informant (Amadi, int., 2014) "simply expressing [their] freedom by changing the street name".

8 The youth groups that circulated around Colombia in those early years, according to Tarela Ebiede (int., 2017), initially evolved around the Agaba Boys, who were a social-cultural masquerade group that operated in many parts of the Delta region. These groups were not like the typical gun-wielding gangs of the early 2000s. In order for them to evolve into the gangs that now exist in the Delta, there was an initial transition phase into fraternities and cults. These fraternities were youth groups whose *raison d'être* was unashamedly criminal and violent—unlike the Agaba Boys, who, in spite of occasional involvement in everyday criminalities, were primarily a socio-cultural outfit. The transition from Agaba to violent cults occurred in the context of profound changes to the oil-driven political landscape of the Niger Delta and the new sets of incentives that it brought in the light of the state's militarisation of the region from the mid-1990s onwards. Of course, cult groups and fraternities had existed in Nigerian youthscapes since the 1950s, but it was around the 1990s that they began to take a violent turn in epidemic proportions (Asuni, 2009; Pérouse de Montclos, 2012). Delta cult groups were unique in that they were not just youth groups rampaging across higher institutions of learning, as in South West Nigeria (Momoh, 2000; Salaam, 2011), but they were intricately connected to a complex broader alternative identity and citizenship movement which combined elements of ethnicity, politics, criminality, spirituality and social ordering in its relationship with the oil state. Ultimately, Delta cults appeared able to accommodate multiple forms of youthhood in ways that were not generally possible in many other parts of Nigeria.

9 This fluid landscape of youth is possible in part because of the rapid social changes that the oil economy introduced into the Niger Delta region. In many ways, the broader political economy of oil is a major canvas upon which the politics of gang-making and youthhood play out in Port Harcourt more generally and in Colombia specifically. Oruwari and Owei (2006: 6) note, for instance, that gangs in the city "have become a security threat to oil workers" due to their "involvement [...] in bunkering,[1] extortions, and kidnapping of expatriate oil workers". Many gang activities revolve around the opportunities provided by the oil economy on the one hand and the distortions to local livelihoods that it simultaneously engenders on the other. While gangs in Colombia often engaged with what were very local issues, their sustenance and connections to the wider society was very much framed by the politics of oil extraction. For instance, many of the ethnic-themed gangs that frequented the neighbourhood were intimately connected to extortion and kidnapping rackets which targeted oil companies. The

income from these activities often fuelled violent struggles for supremacy across the gang landscape in the Niger Delta.

10 As a site of social circulation within the gang universe in Port Harcourt, Colombia represented a melting pot from which many of the youth who would play active roles in the insurgency that was to rock the Nigerian oil economy to its very foundations from around 2003 cut their teeth (Omeje, 2004; Oriola et al., 2013; Iwilade, 2014). This part of the city of Port Harcourt is therefore a particularly useful entry point for analysing both the everyday relevance and framing of youth and also the way this everyday social engagement echoes in the broader recesses of local and national politics.

Youth as *doing* and as *belonging* in Port Harcourt’s Colombia

> How can you call yourself a youth when you just sit down there doing nothing? What is the purpose of your strength?
> (Bozi, int., 2014)

11 At the start of any sustained engagement with young people in the Niger Delta, it quickly becomes apparent that “youth” is an active concept. To be a “youth” within conflict contexts, your concept of “youth” needs to be active in the sense that it is constantly navigating the unstable urban spaces, circulating within what Maira and Soep (2004) called “youthscapes” and/or participating in the many grey (often violent) activities through which life acquires meaning in the neighbourhood. By constructing youth as a verb, the concept becomes intertwined with connotations of agency as well as of responsibility. It places the idea of being “youth” in a social struggle (often, but not always, generational) that ultimately means that it is a social space into which individuals cannot seek inclusion except through groups.

12 Being (doing) youth is profoundly different from being young. To be young, one needs to be in a marginal social position in which one is subject to the rules of society and dependent on its benevolence. To be “youth” however, one cannot “sit down there doing nothing”; therefore, one must “belong”.[2] What this indicates is that youth is essentially an acquired status only available to those who can access the violent networks that shape political life in the region. One of the most constant refrains heard during fieldwork in various parts of the Delta, including Colombia, is the idea that “youth” has a distinctly active connotation, often referring to those who “have street credibility”, who are “not civilians”, and who “belong”. It hardly ever refers to young people in the general population who are not actively involved in politicised or large-scale violence. Interestingly, this category is the large silent majority of young people in the Niger Delta. What Bozi, whom I quoted above, meant by “doing nothing” was not that those in the general population were idle, but that they did not participate in the many opportunities for violence, macho performances, and politics available in the oil economy and that they had few connections to the patronage networks that shape the region.

13 This is an interesting angle to the conceptualisation of “youth” in that it highlights three key things. First, one has to actually be “doing things”, that is, participating in the often dangerous social culture, to qualify to be youth. Being of the right generation

or having similar experiences of social life means little if one is not within the networks of violence involved in the multiplicities of disruptive activities in the region. I use disruptive here not in a pejorative sense but to capture activities designed to challenge social norms or to renegotiate social relations. Therefore “youth” as used in conflict contexts is a “verb” rather than a “noun”. Second, while youthfulness is individual, to acquire that status in ways that matter to social navigation it has to be expressed within the context of a social group. This means that “youth” is not just a verb, it is also a plural one. Third, to be youth both requires and implies that one is connected to broader politicised structures of patronage through which access to the proceeds of oil (mostly illegal) revenue is determined. This notion of youthhood can account for many of the social categories that have played central roles in the renegotiation of the nature of power, citizenship and democracy across Africa. From Liberia to Egypt, youth denotes an active social category willing and able to make claims against the state and able to live (and thrive) on its margins.

14 The implications of this conceptualisation of “youth” as a verb are profound. In the first place, it fractures the generational category of the young and ultimately privileges those whose activities can be most disruptive to the social order. This way of conceptualising youth is apparent in the way the Niger Delta Amnesty[3] was structured so that the benefits were directed at “youth” rather than the young. It is also apparent in the measures many young people took in order to acquire the status of “youth” as a way of inserting themselves into the lucrative space of youthhood offered by the Amnesty. As it appears here, youth cannot simply be “imagined” or “lived”, it also has to be “done” in order to separate social actors from a less forceful and marginalised generational category. Secondly, this conceptualisation of youth almost always excludes females. In fact, I did not find any instance in which “youth” was inclusive of young women in the way the concept was used. This is strange given the important role that many young women play in the politics of the region and indeed within the youthscape itself. However, their visibility is practically written out of the discourse of youth in the Niger Delta and it is hard to find women in the popular discursive space referred to as “youth”. Where women’s roles are included in the narrative, “women” or “girls” are actually the preferred terms rather than youth. This is also applicable where respondents are female. What this means is that when people refer to “the youth” in the region, they almost exclusively mean young men. This is of course a problematic way of thinking of the term. However, I maintain fidelity with this all-male conceptualisation in this study primarily because my focus is actually on young men and that conceptualisation does no analytical damage to the questions I explored. This is not to be taken to mean that young women played no part in the networks that I studied. The networks are, however, overwhelmingly male and, perhaps more importantly, the space is very masculine. In fact, in the cases in which young women come up, they seemed to take on masculine identities. Performing masculinity is a key aspect of “doing” youth.

15 In the subsequent mapping of youth politics, it should be noted that youth is defined along the lines of its usefulness as a verb of action and in its predominantly masculine form. Youth thus is taken to mean people, mostly men, who, by virtue of their participation in various social actions which renegotiate or aim to renegotiate social relations, are willing to claim and capable of claiming to belong to a younger generation for the purpose of appropriating the spaces of contentious politics. This conception of youth builds on rather than abandons the different notions of youth—as

a life-stage (Johnson-Hanks, 2002), as a subculture of sociality (Latysheva, 2011), as becoming (Christiansen et al., 2006; Vigh, 2009), or as something in between vanguards and vandals (Abbink and Kessel, 2005)—that have shaped analysis of political instability in many African states over the last decade.

16 What this way of thinking about youth does is that it consciously disaggregates the politically active youth from the general pool of the young (both biologically and socially so). This disaggregation is informed by the highly politically charged connotation that the use of the term “youth” often implies in contexts where violence is driven wholly or in part by insurgencies either themed around specific generational tensions or in which generational boundaries play a critical role in mobilisation. In this respect, the idea of who can claim to be youth or who is characterised as youth is dependent on *acts of doing* rather than *of being*.

Youth and angels in Colombia

17 Very few places have been more emblematic of contentious sites of youthful power and agency at the turn of the millennium than the oil rich Niger Delta region of Nigeria. The Colombia neighbourhood provides interesting illustrations of how youth is framed which highlight its articulation as an active verb of self-expression as well as of belonging. A useful entry point is to explore the distinction between the youth and the so called “angels” of Colombia as a way of illustrating the earlier point about *being youth and being young*.

18 There were two main categories of young men circulating in Colombia. The first and most visible was a significant minority who belonged to the many gangs, fraternities and cults[4] which were the driving forces behind the illicit but highly lucrative drug and prostitution rings that milled around Colombia’s Number One Field. The Number One Field was bound on one side by the Romeo Night Club, which was little more than a crudely cobbled together cluster of wooden sheds and temporary brick buildings. This club provided space for transactional sex and sheltered spaces in which many of the bigger drug deals were conducted. The members of the various youth gangs often sat around long tables in different parts of the Number One Field socialising. They lived in a world that was evidently separate from that of many of their contemporaries, especially in language of expression, dress code and body art. One group called The Uglies went out of its way to show its separateness from both angels and other gang members.

19 The Uglies were initially known as a dance group and their key identity was the deliberate culturing of grotesque body art, hairstyles and modes of dressing. This counterculture was created in defiance of bourgeois notions of respectability that appeared to be popular with angels. This bourgeois respectability emphasised western education, Christianity, and “gentlemanly” behaviour. In the chaotic and violent space of Colombia, however, these notions of respectability held little meaning for gang members who have to daily navigate very uncertain and dangerous social environments. The Uglies emerged in Okirika, a town just outside of Port Harcourt, but became quite popular in Colombia and around the waterfront slums of the oil city. One Colombia resident described the distinction between The Uglies and angels:

> You see even though Colombia was dangerous, fights everywhere, people dying and all that. It was a very lively place. And when there wasn’t any fight, what the

> difference between the boys and angels? You see? That is where people like the Uglies come in. If you see someone that belongs, you can't call that person an angel. They are different. Is it the tattoo? Or the dressing? Or even the way they talk? You can't even wear some colours if you are an angel. If you wear a yellow-yellow [a combination of yellow shirt and pants], and you don't belong, you are just asking for trouble. So you see, the angels were not really there. They were there, but not really there, you know what I mean?

The point this resident was making is that during the long periods in which gun violence did not easily distinguish between those who were considered youth and the young, other forms of identity signifiers and markers were deliberately cultivated and constructed as a way of performing (or, if you like, "doing") youth. Those who could claim the space and identity of youth were thus those like members of the Uglies who could embed themselves within a counterculture that defined itself in opposition to society.

20 It is interesting to note that this distinction is not only made by angels but also by the Nigerian State itself. I was consistently struck by the tendency of young people who did not claim affiliation with any gang to refer to gang members as "the youth". When prodded about why they seem to "other" the youth category even though they themselves were apparently young, one of them explained it quite aptly thus:

> Yes I know I am also supposed to be a youth. But am I? Can I join them in their runs? So if I can't follow them out to operations how can someone be one of them? When we say youth here, nor be people like me o [Nobody refers to people like me when they call people "youth"].

21 Indeed, the Nigerian state's conception of who can claim to be the youth of the oil Delta also conforms to this street-constructed notion of youthhood. For instance, the Disarmament, Demobilisation and Reintegration programme launched as an Amnesty project in 2009 focused almost exclusively on the category of violent youth. While this is not surprising, it is interesting to note that this happened in spite of the declared goal of government to use the Amnesty as a tool to "develop" the whole of the Niger Delta rather than the narrow minority of youth who belong.

Doing youth and the Delta cults of respectability

> If you don't join them you are a lazy man. In fact you are not a man. They won't respect you.
> (Peter, int., 9 April 2013)

22 The way in which youthhood is framed is also intimately connected to the way respectability is conceptualised in these contexts. Indeed, to be youth means to perform (or to do) respectability in specific ways that fit into the Niger Delta's universe of macho violence and competition. The neighbourhood of Colombia embodies this dynamic in interesting ways. A good example is the process of rule formation within one of the most prominent groups in Colombia in the mid-1990s, the OX. According to multiple interview respondents, an Agaba Boys group called the "OX" had been formed by the Colombia youth partly as a response to the arrest of Gowon, a local youth leader who controlled much of the activity in Colombia in the 1990s. Members of the community allege that the main reason for the constant police harassment was actually to extort bribes rather than to clamp down on illegal activities. As Darlington (int., 2015), a former member of the OX put it, "We were like ATMs[5] for the police. They need

money for beer, they arrest, they need money for pepper soup, na [its] Colombia they will come [to].” The survival of the gangs and their consequent metamorphosis into vigilantes and/or militant groups by the early 2000s seems to justify this cynicism.

23 The running battles between the OX and the police generated unprecedented solidarity among the young people of 1990s Colombia, but also created tensions that often boiled over into violence when the different decks[6] clashed over how to respond to the multiple challenges the group faced. While the problem with the police was the initial drive, the emergence of rival groups around Port Harcourt and a growing national university cult crisis meant that increasing attention was devoted to clashes with other youth gangs. It was on this new violent frontier that masculinities were being created and constantly tested. As Darlington (int., 2015) explained:

> [...] but many boys were forming their own groups. The boys in Diobu, all those university boys, everywhere, Benin, Warri, Lagos. Everything just turned messy all of a sudden. It was even worse after Operation Crush killed Gowon. It was that time trouble started between town and Diobu, as there was no one to talk to people. In no time, the problem was no longer the police but Deewell.

24 As the intergang clashes unfolded by the late 1990s and early 2000s, pitting different armed groups of young men against one another, the main basis of solidarity among Colombia youth, which was a common enemy in the police, began to fracture and not even the creation of street-wide vigilante-like systems could guarantee solidarity in the way it existed before the death of Gowon. It was in the context of these fracturing solidarities that greater demands were placed on young men to earn respect by proving their masculinity. As the opening quote in this section indicates, masculinity was defined in violent terms, it required a capacity to inflict violence as well as endure it. It also depended in good part on the ability to perform violence, to act it even when actual violence is not or cannot be used.

25 According to accounts, in the midst of the turmoil, the OX met sometime in 1999 and drew up a code requiring members to “act with reason, with courage, and like men”. They were also required to “never forgive” and to “leave the last man”. Darlington, who was at that meeting, described the motivations:

> That night we held a meeting in Occasion’s house. Occasion just got to the area, but he was connected and was trying to bring people together. Many of the boys causing trouble since Gowon was killed didn’t like Occasion mainly because he was new. But this Occasion boy was a senior man. He was courageous. Because some of the boys were formerly from Colombia, and moved to Diobu because of all the trouble, it was hard for people to agree to murder them. So we set rules. You know? Something like a code of conduct. You must not act like a woman, you must never forgive, you know? No retreat no surrender. Anybody that can’t prove himself and act like a man cannot be a national. You can’t be a leader in OX. So everybody began to behave.

26 It was clear from my conversations with Darlington and other men who had been active in Colombia in those years that one of the reasons the masculine codes were drawn up was to resolve lingering doubts among lower-level members of the gang about the proprietary of inflicting sometimes fatal violence on people who were former members of the Colombia community but who had fled as a result of disputes over the transfer of power to Occasion after Gowon’s death. The codes were essentially designed to blackmail these members into action by targeting one of the core sociological motivations that recruited them to participation in the first place—the respect of their peers. By constructing a social code that linked violent masculinity to respectability,

the OX leadership effectively created a tool of control that was subtle in its visibility yet powerful in its overall effect. They also effectively reconstructed what it meant to be youth by rupturing the social norms under which young people had been brought up as well as by othering less-connected members of the same youth universe. Bright, another former member of the OX, explained the aftermath of this meeting:

> Immediately it became that if you don’t fight nobody will recognise you, many new boys even joined. They wanted to be seen, to prove themselves. Some of them even went overboard. That was a time of real men, not these boys shooting indiscriminately now. People became rugged men, they became youth.

27 The way violence was inscribed into notions of masculinity by the OX validates Lake’s (1986) argument that men are socialised into masculinity rather than born into it. Tapping into broader ideas about the “fighting man” as well as a popular history of many communities in the Delta, where, according to one of my informants, Tonye (int., 2015), “every family has a war canoe”, the OX appealed to a sense of worth that is mediated by violence in all its ramifications. It also appealed to a new way of thinking about youth, a way that connected youthhood to the performance of violence and to circulation in the precarious universe of opportunities and risks that it generates.

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28 The reality for many active Delta youth is that they live, as Chernoff (2003: 41) describes for the so-called “marginal people”, in a “realm where norms and their limits are often highlighted” and, as such, they are particularly “well informed about points of breakdown, weakness and ineffectiveness in the institutions of competing systems”. This awareness implies that they are well suited to exploiting the very notion of their marginality in ways that allow them to exert subtle influences on political power. It also means that they are able to set themselves apart from other less-connected young people in ways that allow them to corner the resources of state that are allocated to their common generation. In many ways, the distinction between youth and the young, along with the questions surrounding respect and marginality, all combine to show the internal contradictions and contestations that ultimately occur within the youth category itself. This encourages the unpacking of youth in meaningful ways. It also highlights the different ways in which youthhood can be framed by the politics of extraction. By providing the opportunities for illicit accumulation on the one hand and simultaneously distorting local economies on the other, oil extraction (or any such disruptive multinational capital and technology-intensive activity) generates social contestations that often spill over into the everyday politics of youth. These patterns are observable not just in the Niger Delta but also in other extractive contexts. For instance, Levin (2006) writes about the impacts of alluvial diamond mining in Sierra Leone’s Kono region on the political economy of social organisation while Sayndee (2008) and Richards (1996) make similar points about youth cultures and resource extraction in Liberia.

29 Bourdieu was right to have argued that neither youth nor age is self-evident as they are both “socially manipulated and manipulable” (1993: 95). Yet the assumption that those who manipulate the meaning of youth are necessarily embedded in adult power centres misses the point of youth as a social construct. In periods of rapid and uncertain social

transitions, in which the youth category is both the threat as well as an opportunity, the notion of youth is connected simultaneously to acts of doing things—of intervention and of participation—and to the implications of not doing those things. This distinction between those who do and those who do not (or between *youth* and *angels* as in the Niger Delta) is central to understanding how violence spatially and socially shapes the construction of youthhood. Its framing is also largely determined by those who operate within the youthscapes rather than by those outside it. In other words, the legitimacy of that label flows outwards from the youthscape into society rather than the other way round. In places of calm and peace, the notion of youth could be accurately captured by the very fact of being. *Being* in this context refers both to biology and to sociality and is constituted by a striving for social adulthood. The exact articulation of this striving, as well as its outcome, is framed by prevailing modernities and hegemonies. As the Comaroffs (2006: 20) put it, modernity "casts 'youth' as both the essential precondition and the indefinite postponement of maturity". But what is clear is that what constitutes a youth in this type of context is not so much what youth do or do not do, but more about where they are on the social ladder—what they are (or have). This generalised notion of youth, however, struggles to apply where social relations and the norms governing them are ruptured by long periods of violence. This is even more true where violence has become *the context* rather than happening *in context*, in which case, *doing youth* becomes more important than *being youth*.

30 One should also listen to what youth means when the label is used by people living within contexts of generationally-themed violence. When they say "youth", do they refer to a state of having not attained social adulthood (as in Cruise O'Brien, 1996; Honwana, 2012) or do they refer to the very act of intervention, of resisting and of challenging established authority? It appears that what the so-called "marginal" people do or do not do is more crucial to their self-framing and how they are framed than what they are. This is why the question of "how can you call yourself youth when you sit down there doing nothing?" (Bozi, int., 2014) is an important illustration of what is meant when people on the ground describe someone as youth. To ensure greater analytical clarity when analysing contexts of permanent violence, this study suggests that scholars should discuss being youth as distinct from being young (whether socially or biologically). In this sense, youth takes on verb form and describes actions, aspirations, and agency rather than marginality or becoming.

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Interviewees (all male)

Amadi, age about 33, grew up in Bende Street, Port Harcourt and frequented the drug hotspots of Colombia in the 1990s and early 2000s. Interviewed intermittently between August 2014–March 2015.

Bozi, member of the Icelander cult, interviewed in Yenagoa, October 2014.

Darlington, ex-militant, former resident of Colombia, now resident in Lagos. Received amnesty and spent time in Igbinedion University, Okada. Interviewed at Okada in September 2014. Follow-up phone interviews between 2015 and 2016.

Peter C., then 26-year-old ex-militant fighter of the Niger Delta Volunteers (NDV), based in Warri, Delta State, from Tsekelewu, enrolled in the amnesty programme and was sponsored to study for a degree at the Lead City University, Ibadan. Interviewed intermittently between March 2013 and April 2013 and intermittently in 2014 and 2015.

Tarela A., then 29-year-old former member of the Vikings cult group, enrolled in the amnesty programme and sponsored to study for a degree at the Lead City University, Ibadan. Interviewed intermittently between March and April 2013.

Tarela E., academic from Bayelsa State, informal consultations.

Tonye, current long-term resident of Bende Street in Colombia, member of the Buccaneers cult group, about 28 years of age. Interviewed intermittently between August 2014 and March 2015.

NOTES

1. Bunkering is the term used locally to refer to the theft of crude oil. This is often accomplished by drilling into pipelines carrying crude from extraction sites to refineries or for subsequent export and siphoning large quantities for sale. A good percentage of this stolen crude is sold on the local market where it is transported in small barges to remote sites hidden from view by the thick mangrove forests and from where it is refined using crude artisanal methods and then sold in the open market. A good description of the entire value chain and of the narratives used to legitimise this by youth is available in Ugor (2013).

2. Those who “belong” are those who are members of any of the many cult groups, youth gangs, vigilantes or militias that dot the Niger Delta region. This is cult slang that is quite popular across Southern Nigeria. Those who do not belong are referred to variously as civilians, “Jew men”, angels, or simply young men.

3. After years of violence directed against the Nigerian state and oil multinationals, the government launched a Presidential Amnesty Programme in 2009 to attempt to end the violence and establish the peace needed to guarantee the continued extraction of oil from the Niger Delta. By the conclusion of the major disarmament phase, about 30,000 youth had surrendered weapons and gone through what was dubbed a peace and empowerment training. For more information on the amnesty, its political motivation, and its aftermath, see Nwajiaku-Dahou (2012), Ushie (2013) and Iwilade (2017).

4. There are numerous gangs operating in Port Harcourt. Some have estimated the number at somewhere around 100 (Concannon and Newsom, 2004), and the Rivers State Government actually announced a ban on 103 cult groups in 2004 (Rivers State Government, 2004). Massive as this number apparently is, it conceals a more complex universe of gangs, constantly shifting alliances, membership and reach. Indeed, the gang landscape in city is so complicated that one former member of the Vikings, Tarela A (int., 2014) told me that one of the biggest problems faced by members sometimes is “you never know who is fighting who or where the fighting is going to happen”. In his words, “we just tag along anywhere the belly faces”. One way to decode the different organisations is to look at the labels with which they describe themselves. Cults or fraternities are usually based in university campuses, especially the University of Port Harcourt and the Rivers State University of Science and Technology (RSUST) in Bori. Militants are usually based in the creeks or around the city itself and often actively frame themselves in the language of resistance and ethnic community. In reality, however, their activities are very similar to those other groups. Then there are those groups which tend to veil their activities in the language of vigilantes, occult groups or artistic performances like the Agaba, the Egbesu Boys, Njemanze Vigilante and the Uglies. These are based in the various waterfront slums across the city as well as in notorious neighbourhoods like Colombia. These divisions, however, tell little about the shifting alliances or indeed what the dispute or collaboration is about at any given time.

5. Cash machine.

6. Organisational units of cult groups are often referred to as *Decks*.

ABSTRACTS

This paper uses an ethnography of youth gangs in the oil-rich Niger Delta region of Nigeria to explore the distinctions between *being young* and *being youth* and to argue that, in order to understand the complexities of a category whose politics have profoundly influenced the history of contemporary social transitions in many African societies, one must analytically disaggregate its various components and highlight the interesting ways in which various contexts can shape it. There is of course a wide variety of spatial and historical contexts which shape the nature of the experiences that youth have. In this paper, the context of oil extraction and a long history of violent social ruptures in the Niger Delta are used as entry points into understanding how youthhood is framed as well as understood, and how different categories of actors engage with its constantly changing realities.

À partir d’une ethnographie conduite au sein des gangs de jeunes dans la région pétrolifère du delta du Niger au Nigeria, l’article analyse la distinction que ces voyous opèrent et manipulent entre le fait d’« être jeune » et celui de « jouer au jeune ». Cette distinction illustre la complexité de catégories qui ont profondément influencé le changement dans les sociétés contemporaines en Afrique. Il y a bien sûr une grande variété de contextes spatiaux et historiques qui façonnent la nature des expériences vécues par les jeunes. Ici, le contexte de l'extraction pétrolière et une longue histoire de ruptures sociales violentes dans le delta du Niger sont utilisés comme points d'entrée pour comprendre comment la jeunesse peut être délimitée et appréhendée, et comment diverses catégories d'acteurs se jouent de ses contours mouvants et de ses attributs changeants.

INDEX

Geographical index: Delta du Niger, Nigéria
Mots-clés: catégorie de jeunes, extraction pétrolière, groupes de jeunes, localité, vie quotidienne, violence
Keywords: everyday life, locality Niger Delta, Nigeria, oil extraction, violence, youth category, youth groups

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